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Supporting Care as a Layer of Concern: Nurturing Attitudes in Online Community Moderation

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Abstract

Care can be treated as an attitude: it is routinely exercised by people in daily life and surfaces when challenging incidents are encountered. We use care as a lens to explore normative processes in online community moderation. This position paper addresses the importance of care in online communities, and what it might mean to approach an analysis of online moderation practice by treating care as an attitude of nurture. Finally, we consider how CSCW researchers might make use of care-as-nurture when designing support for online communities as a whole and in particular for the moderators who care for them.

Author Keywords

Care; online communities; moderation; fairness; emotion; empathy; community norms.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m [Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI)]: Miscellaneous; H.5.3 [Group and Organization Interfaces]: Computer-supported cooperative Work

Introduction

The opportunity for people to exchange ideas is supported by the majority of online communities. Indeed, member contributions and reactions can be seen as their very lifeblood. Members can contribute status reports, short snippets

or longer texts through comments, as well as respond to the original postings made by others. As would be true of an encounter with any particular community, participation requires attunement to the values and modes of engagement that are familiar and acceptable to existing members. However, online communities represent a different order of attunement: with mixed cultural, temporal, geographical and technical modes all contributing to the special community contexts members will encounter. Textual interaction requires more work and normative understanding so that it conveys appropriate social information [16]. Member activity can be tracked and audited in detail with consequences for reputation and, subsequently, influence. Contributor identities can be manipulated, obfuscated or multiple, limiting accountability and individuation in online interactions, potentially creating groupthink myopia or echochamber effects [14, 8]. Some forms of comments, such as trolling, insults or derails, can become very problematic for online communities; hence, most online-platforms employ moderation, which can assist the wider membership to maintain the quality of comments, the discussions they constitute, and to mitigate potentially negative effects.

Care as a Factor in Community Sustainability

For maker/contributor communities, Toombs et al. argue that care is a key driver for sustainability, requiring the work of the entire community to maintain the value of their exchanges, which means it is not necessarily helpful to leave this responsibility to a small group of powerful key players [15]. Taking care implies feeling responsible for initiating and also maintaining caring activities [4]. Care work overlaps with the mission of the moderator in an online communities: taking care of the community as a whole, not just the interests of individual members, stimulating healthy discussions and maintaining a positive environment for constructive exchange. Critiques of online moderation models and sug-

gestions for improvement have been made (e.g., [10]), but relatively little is known about the practices of moderation that lead to a practice of care. Identifying such practices opens up an understanding of moderation that is not simply concerned with removing the problematic posts, or censoring difficult members, but involves thoughtful decisions and active support for the whole community. We argue that it is important to understand how individual actions around problematic contributions, especially those taken by moderators, reveal thinking that is situated in caring practices. In other words, how care is an attitude towards the discursive lifeblood of online communities. We understand care as permeating all moderation activities rather than as a separate category of action. We further argue that positioning care in this way presents new opportunities for design thinking. Technical possibilities offered at the level of an individual post, or member, could be cross-connected with the broader conversational and normative contexts to which they contribute.

Care as an Orientation towards Nurturing Discussion

Within online communities, care can be performed by and for different actors: between members, between moderators, among the community as a whole. De la Bellacasa notes that care is often motivated by the perception that things around us are being neglected [3]. An awareness of neglect helps to demonstrate the kinds of activity that are involved in maintenance work as well as how care surfaces. Care as a pro-active stance in online-communities encourages committed engagement and can positively contribute to the reinforcement of norms regulating what is appropriate behaviour within a given online community [11, 13]. We position our notion of care as a nurturing attitude towards the emergence and expansion of member exchanges. Caring for something implicitly entails normative notions of sup-

porting its growth and development while at the same time removing obstacles for that growth [9]. Moreover, it includes encouragement for people to make an effort behind the scenes to engage, contribute and maintain the community [1, 11]. Preece and Schneiderman [10] suggest that an atmosphere of empathy and trust is effective because it promotes belonging to the community. Nurturing care as an attitude for all participants is therefore very important for initiating and maintaining the growth of online communities.

Care in Online Community Moderation

Different approaches in moderation exist, including automatic filtering content or review by a human expert [7]. However, the fair and thoughtful process involved in human moderators' oversight is still required to reach an ideal of careful moderation [6]. MetaFilter¹ is a '*community weblog*' founded in 1999, which is praised for creating the foundation for the positive engagement [12] the site is most notable for its high quality content [2]. Through analysing posts from 2016 and 2017 and interviewing moderators on MetaFilter, we concluded that moderators of MetaFilter bring care as an attitude into their practices when engaging with the community. Care adds another layer in every decision they made, for example, they give compliments, praise and provide empathetic comforts to members. Not limited to removing the undesirable posts, moderators of MetaFilter stay aware of issues that may arise and provide alternative options proactively. Moreover, they encourage their members to take care of each others by modelling care themselves. All the moderators are long time members and are paid workers with the site.

Conclusion

The freedom to speak that characterizes many online communities is as much an outcome of caring moderation as it

is of the technical means to compose and submit a comment on a video, song or blog post. Norms themselves must be curated with care, not with a rigid self-interest of a clique of old-hands, if communities are to continually welcome new members and to grow.

Through our study with MetaFilter, we see that care shapes moderation on MetaFilter and supports the sustainability of the community. Moreover, the larger community perceives moderators' activities as caring which they are then inclined to reciprocate. It is the key to the motivation of members to commit to the community. Therefore, online moderation could go beyond "commenting promotion, deletion, and control" [5]. Moderators are not just acting as custodians of the community, but instead become integral to the identity of the community.

We are planning to work within a general framework of care to examine how the work of moderators is flavoured by their care for community growth and sustainability. We argue that rather than being just nice to have, nurturing an online community with care has functional consequences for the technical mechanisms moderators wish to deploy as part of their work. We see community membership via networked relations and temporal shifts in patterns of exchange as new opportunities for supporting constructive intra-community discourse difficult or contested issues.

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¹<https://www.metafilter.com>

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